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THE NEW YORK TIMES, M

Aide to Dr. King Says Ray Isn't Guilty

Special to The New York Times

PHILADELPHIA, Jan. 19 — The Rev. James L. Bevel, director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a long-time associate of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has offered to defend Dr. King's accused assassin.

Mr. Bevel's administrative assistant, Beverly Sterner, confirmed today that he had sent a telegram containing the offer to James Earl Ray, who is awaiting trial in the murder of the civil rights leader. Mr. Bevel, she said, maintains he has "such evidence that would prove James Earl Ray innocent."

She said that the offer was not meant to be taken as a symbolic gesture blaming white racism rather than Ray personally for the murder. "This is a serious offer," she said.

Will Speak Out in Court

She said Mr. Bevel would make his evidence known in court. He is not a lawyer, she said, but he has often defended himself and other civil rights workers successfully.

"He knows the law and he lives the law," she added. "He just doesn't play tricks in the courtroom like the lawyers do."

In Atlanta, a spokesman for the leadership conference said that Mr. Bevel had acted on his own in sending the telegram. The spokesman said the organization would have no comment.

The Rev. James L. Bevel

According to The Associated Press, Mr. Bevel told a news conference here today: "I have evidence that would free him. I won't discuss the epecific evidence now because it wouldn't be beneficial to James Earl Ray. But he's not guilty."

In the telegram, sent to the Shelby County jail in Tenessee Saturday, Mr. Bevel said:

"I wish to inform you that I would be very happy to take your case without fee. I was present on April 4 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis when Dr. King died. You have been accused of murdering him. Of course, I know you are not guilty."

No Reply Received

Miss Saerner said no reply had yet been received.

Ray is scheduled to go on trial March 3. He dismissed his first lawyer, Arthur Haynes, who had handled the case since Ray was arrested last June in London, and hired instead Percy Foreman.

Mr. Bevel was one of several leadership conference officials who were with Dr. King when he was killed by a sniper at a Memphis motel. They were in Memphis to support the demands of striking Negro garbage collectors.

Mr. Bevel, who has often acted as liaison between Dr. King and young Ngro militants and white radicals, was assigned here after last year's Poor People's Campaign in Washington to serve as director of nonviolent education.

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